

# Implications on a Designed Questionnaire about English Teachers' In-class Example Designs

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**Abstract**—How to give examples is an important class behavior of college EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers. This paper adopted the macrostrategies claimed by Kumaravadivelu in his Postmethod Theory. Through the analysis of questionnaires, the paper explored students' opinions about English EFL teachers' in-class example designs. The research results indicate that students prefer the sentences loaded with some cultural or social knowledge; teachers don't need to write the whole sentence on the blackboard or in PowerPoint; only the structure or the key words of the sentence need to be provided; the sentences could help students review the previous language points etc. These remind the teachers, when giving examples, should pay attention to the cultural input, in-class interaction and strategy teaching, which are coherent with macrostrategies in Postmethod era. In a word, the analysis of language teachers' in-class example sentence giving behavior could help teachers improve their teaching quality, thus help improve EFL learners' English proficiency.

**Index Terms**—example design, macrostrategies, postmethod, teachers' behavior

## I. INTRODUCTION

How to design example sentences in EFL class may be a cliché but unavoidable topic. English is considered as a foreign language instead of second language in China. In such teaching and learning environment, students have very few chances to practice their English in their daily life. Therefore, it is very important to enhance English input in the classroom, and EFL teachers should try to provide students with more authentic language materials in the limited in-class time.

As early as the 1930s, Vygotsky (1978), the Russian and Soviet psychologist, and the founder of cultural-historical psychology, proposed the theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky, there is a distance between language learners' background knowledge and the new knowledge when the language learner tries to learn a new language. However, this distance could be eliminated with language teacher's help and the individual learning as well. This distance is called the Zone of Proximal Development (Liang, 2010). In the 1980s, American linguist Krashen (1982) put forward the famous language input hypothesis. Krashen defined the learner's current learning state as "i" and the next stage of language development as "i+1". The number 1 means the distance between learner's current learning state and the next stage. This distance, or the "gap", could be established with learner's own learning or the teacher's scaffolding function (Vacca, 2000; Echevarria, Vogt and Short, 2013). Some researchers argued whether the ZPD theory and the language input hypothesis are essentially the same (Kinginger, 2001). However, no matter these two theories are essentially the same or not, both mentioned language teachers' important role during learner's learning process.

Kumaravadivedu (2003) proposed the ten macrostrategies in the postmethod era. These ten macrostrategies are: Maximize learning opportunities; facilitate negotiated interaction; minimize perceptual mismatches; activate intuitive heuristics; foster language awareness; contextualize linguistic input; integrate language skills; promote learner autonomy; ensure social relevance; and raise cultural consciousness. (Tao, 2007; Zheng and Chen, 2007). The researcher believes that these ten macrostrategies raise higher requirements for language teachers, for teachers need not only to impart knowledge, but also to build a scaffold and think about how to maximize students' learning opportunities and how to make students' self-learning more strategically effective and efficient. This paper focuses only on the English teachers' example sentence design behavior. Questionnaires are used to understand students' need toward teachers' example design behavior and to what extent teachers could help students to achieve these mentioned macrostrategies.

In the previous studies, many researchers focused on the principles of in-class teachers' example design behavior. For example, Liu and Xu (2005) claimed that when English teachers selected sentences as examples, whether these sentences are typical, practical, and interesting should be considered. Liu (2010) discussed the example sentence teaching from the perspective of in-class interaction. She mentioned that the sentence should be dynamically generated in the class. The teacher should combine the prepared sentences and students' in-class performance to arouse students' interest. The form of giving examples should also be diversified. The teacher could use both blackboard and multimedia tools to create a relaxing learning environment for students. All the above mentioned research are mostly based on language teachers' experience and the in-class observation, which have great value for designing the examples before

the class (Guo, 2012), however, none of these studies are empirical analysis based on students' need, thus the discussions are not deep enough.

This paper adopted the questionnaire toward language teachers' example giving behavior designed by Guo (2012). This questionnaire followed the four principles raised by Krashen about language input: truthfulness, understandability, relevance and moderation (Liang, 2010). The whole questionnaire was designed from two perspectives: content and form. The investigation subjects are undergraduate students majoring in teaching Chinese as a second language in a university. This paper tries to fully consider students' need and analyze English teachers' in-class example giving behavior in a detailed way.

## II. RESEARCH METHOD

### A. Research Questions

This paper attempts to solve these two questions: 1) whether English teachers' example-giving behavior conforms to the requirements of macrostrategies claimed by Kumaravadevelu. 2) Whether there are any relations between students' attitude towards teachers' example-giving behavior and their English proficiency.

### B. Research Design

The subjects are 68 undergraduate students including 6 males and 62 female students, majoring in teaching Chinese to foreigners in a university. Questionnaires were designed and sent to them. When doing the questionnaire, these subjects were sophomores. They have learned English for one and half years with four hours each week. This period is in fact the longest time they could learn English in class during their whole university time. Meanwhile, all of these students took part in the CET-4 (College English Test, Band -4). Therefore, the result of the questionnaire could be compared with their CET result as part of the current study.

### C. Research Results

#### 1. Results of the Questionnaire

Table 1 shows students' answers to the questionnaire.

TABLE I.  
STUDENTS' ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Questions	Contents	Mean
(1)	The teacher just needs to speak out the sentences, instead of writing it down.	2.5909
(2)	The teacher should write down the sentence on the blackboard while explaining.	2.9091
(3)	The teacher just needs to write down the structure and the key words of the sentence instead of the whole one.	<u>1.8182</u>
(4)	After explaining it, the teacher should read the sentence with students together.	<u>3.1212</u>
(5)	The sentence should be related with students' daily life.	2.3030
(6)	The sentence should be interesting and humorous.	2.5909
(7)	Quite simple words should be used in the sentence.	2.9697
(8)	Besides the words meaning, the sentence should also convey the culture information to us.	<u>1.8030</u>
(9)	The sentence should help me to review the words I've learned.	<u>1.5000</u>
(10)	The sentence should be in the textbook.	<u>3.6818</u>
(11)	The teacher should teach the sentence first, and then the text in the book.	<u>3.1212</u>
(12)	The teacher should use colorful chalks when writing the sentence down.	2.5455
(13)	The teacher should use PPT to show the sentence.	2.2273
(14)	The teacher should use some pictures when explaining the sentence.	2.5758
(15)	After explaining it, the teacher should let us imitate the sentence and make two or three sentences by ourselves.	2.4394
(16)	One sentence is enough for one language point.	<u>3.1818</u>
(17)	For one language point, teacher should use two or three sentences to explain.	2.1212
(18)	The more sentences, the better, for each language point.	<u>3.5077</u>
(19)	The meaning of the sentence should be positive, not negative.	2.7121
(20)	Oral words instead of written words should be used in sentence.	2.8788
(21)	I prefer the impromptu sentences the teacher gives in the class.	2.1818

Note: 1-strongly agree; 2-agree; 3-just so so; 4-disagree; 5-strongly disagree

As can be seen from the table, the means of all these 21 questions are less than 4, which indicate that students' attitudes toward English teacher's in-class example-giving behavior are positive in general, no matter the question is about the example-giving format or the sentence meaning, which also means that teacher's example-giving behavior is very necessary in English class.

#### 2. Analysis to Students' Answers towards the Questionnaire

Through the detailed analysis of the students' questionnaire, students' needs towards English teachers' in-class example-giving behavior could be classified into three types: students' needs towards cultural input; students' needs towards interaction with teachers; and students' needs towards learning strategies. All of these three needs are consistent with the ten macrostrategies claimed by Kumaravadevelu.

##### a. Students' Needs towards Cultural Input

Question 8 is about whether the sentence could convey both the sentence meaning and the cultural and social knowledge. Students' need towards understanding cultural and social knowledge was understood through this question. This is one of the ten macrostrategies claimed by Kumaravadivelu, that is, language teacher should raise students' cultural consciousness. College students in China lack the necessary cultural and social environment to learn English; most students try to understand the cultures in English speaking countries only through books and Internet etc. Therefore, English class is very important. Teachers should consider cultural and social factors when selecting the sentence examples. For example, the researcher used to mention 'subway' when talking about American fast-food culture. At that time, many students were very confused, because besides the name of the famous fast food, subway could also mean 'subway', the literal meaning. Students do not know this fast-food brand, so they felt confused. How to satisfy students' cultural needs is a challenge for English teachers, but it is also a requirement of the English teachers. As regard for question 10, the students hope that the teacher could find more materials besides the textbook for the reading practice, which also reflects students' need for a large number of language input.

#### b. Students' Needs towards Interactions with Teachers

There is one strategy called negotiable interaction among these ten macrostrategies, which means to enhance the teacher-student and student-student interaction. Students' need towards inaction is reflected in question 3. Question 3 is about whether the teacher only needs to write down the structure and key words of the sentence. Many students believe that teachers do not need to write down the whole sentence; in other words, only sentence structure or key words are necessary to write down. The status quo is that in the college English class, many teachers use the prepared PPT, while students are busy taking notes. Students are in fact only the passive acceptors. They have no time to think and obviously no interaction with the teachers. There are objective reasons for taking the PPT form. In China nowadays, it is still very common to have more than 40 students in each English class. Therefore, if the teacher writes too often on the blackboard, some students who sit at the back of the classroom could not see the blackboard clearly. PPT is much clearer than that on the blackboard. Question 1, 2, 12, 13 and 14 shows that students do not have a preference towards the format: whether writing on blackboard or the PPT slides. In current situation, PPT is a more effective and much clearer way. If the sentence adopts the blank filling method: only the sentence structure or some key words are given and students are supposed to fill these blanks, then students' activeness can be activated. Besides, the teacher-student relationship is changed from teacher's conveying to a double-direction interaction (Wright, 2010). In this way, the negotiable interaction could be facilitated and the students' learning opportunities could be maximized.

#### c. Students' Needs towards Learning Strategies

One of the ten macrostrategies Kumaravadivelu mentioned is to cultivate learner's learning autonomy. On how to cultivate students' learning autonomy, he claimed that students learning strategies such as memorizing strategy, cognitive strategy and communicate strategy should be cultivated (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2006). Question 9 is about whether the sentence should help students to review the learned words. Most students hold the opinion that the example sentences should help them review the learned words. This belongs to the 'review' strategy. This requirement of students seems easy, but in fact in the current English class, it fails to be carried out very well. Take the textbook the researcher is using for example, each unit has a fixed and relatively independent topic with no obvious progressive relation with the previous unit. Therefore, when preparing the examples, it requires the English teachers consciously to combine the learned words with the new examples to deepen students' memory. This conforms to the cognitive principle (MaLaughlin & Allen, 2002). Question 11 refers to the teacher's teaching method. Students hold the opinion that it is not necessary to explain the sentence in the textbook individually before teacher's explanation of the whole text. It is plausible because without the context, it is usually hard to understand the sentence, but within the context, students could use some reading strategies to figure out the meaning of the words.

Generally speaking, regarding these 21 questions the researcher found that students did not have many comments on the example showing format, that is, the students did not care too much about whether teacher uses the blackboard or pictures or PPT, whether the teacher uses the colored chalk or not. What the students care is the content of the examples, whether the sentence could convey the cultural and social knowledge, whether the previous knowledge could be reviewed etc. Essentially, these reflect students' needs towards the learning strategies, the cultural input and the interactions, which are very consistent with the macrostrategies in the Postmethod era.

### 3. Comparison between Students' Answers to the Questionnaire and Their CET Scores

In order to further understand whether there is any relationship between students' attitudes towards teachers' in-class giving behavior and their English proficiency, the researcher did a comparison between their answers to the questionnaire and their CET scores, since CET has a high reliability and high validity, which could be used as a parameter to measure students' English proficiency.

Statistics show that in these two classes, the highest CET score is 643, while the lowest is 390. The mean is 522, which is basically conforming to the normal distribution. Because of the limited number of the samples, students were divided into two groups (high group and low group) instead of three, with 522 as the cutting point. T-test was used to distinguish whether there is any difference existing between these two groups and their attitudes towards teachers' in-class example-giving behavior. T-test shows that in terms of question 8 and 11, there are significant differences. For all the other questions, no significant difference exists.

TABLE II.  
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STUDENTS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARDS TEACHERS' IN-CLASS EXAMPLE-GIVING BEHAVIOR

Questions	Mean High group	Mean Low group	P-value
8. Besides the words meaning, the sentence should also convey the culture information to us.	2.00	1.60	.03
11. The teacher should teach the sentence first, and then the text in the book.	3.52	2.73	.00

For question 8, as mentioned above, students hope that the teacher could involve the cultural or social knowledge into the class. However, for the low group students, the data shows that they are more eager to learn more about the social and cultural knowledge. This is unexpected somehow. Usually, the better students' English proficiency is, the stronger their English-learning motivation is, and the more they want to learn the related cultural and social background knowledge. What the data shows is however the opposite. The researcher believes that the reason is related with the features of the college English class. As mentioned, because of the class size, many teachers have no choice but choose to teach with PPT, without enough interaction with students. Therefore, some students who are not good at English may gradually lose their interest in learning English since they have few chances to ask questions. The cultural and social issues are more interesting to them rather than the language points. This may be one of the reasons why they would like the teachers to teach more about the related social and cultural issues. Kumaravadivelu (2003) claimed that no classroom teaching is isolated. In other words, classroom teaching should be related with the social and cultural issues. Question 11 shows that students of different English levels have different learning strategies. For students in high group, they prefer the teachers to teach the text first, then the difficult sentences, while the students in low group prefer to learn the sentences first, then the text. Obviously, to learn sentence first and then the text, this down-top learning strategy has some advantages (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2011). However, the researcher holds the opinion that the top-down strategy is more beneficial since students could learn how to read and guess the word meaning within the context.

All in all, it is hard to judge whether students' English proficiency is positively related with their teachers' in-class example-giving behavior or not based on these 21 questions in the questionnaire. When interviewing students, some students commented that they did not care much about what kind of sentences the teacher used in the class, what they really cared was how many chances they could have to speak and communicate in the class with their partners and the teacher. They complained that they were too negative in the classroom. Shu (2010) claimed that the effective classroom teaching should be reflected by students' activeness and appropriate learning opportunities. Therefore, when teachers design example sentences, they should focus more on whether students' activeness is activated and whether interaction is facilitated.

### III. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

Through the investigation on the English teachers' in-class example-giving behavior, the researcher found that the students' needs were totally consistent with the ten macrostrategies claimed by Kumaravadivelu. Students hope the sentences could convey the cultural and social knowledge; they think the sentences with only the structure and key words are fine; and they hope teachers could help them review the learned knowledge with the given examples. All of these remind the teachers of paying attention to the cultural input, the interaction and the cultivation of students' learning strategies.

(1) The cultural input. Sentences with cultural factors involved can become more interesting. For example, when explaining the word "overwhelm", the given sentence "Sheldon was overwhelmed by great joy when he got the news that he was allowed to meet Mr. Hawking" is more effective than a simple one "He was overwhelmed by great joy". First of all, Sheldon is a very popular character among college students in China now. He is a character in the American sitcom "The big bang theory". One episode is about how Sheldon meets Professor Hawking. This sentence activated students' interest and it is easier to understand and memorize. Meanwhile, as English teachers, they also need to accumulate many related knowledge to satisfy students' needs.

(2) The interaction with students. No matter how well prepared, if the teacher just explains and let students take notes, it is still not very effective. The successful classroom teaching needs students' involvement. For example, when explaining the words "fat, obese, stout, pudgy, plump, and chubby", if the teacher gives some blank fillings instead of the whole sentences, it could be more effective. Sentences such as "Doctors suggest people have less fast food, in order not to be \_\_\_\_\_./ There was a time when the \_\_\_\_\_ figure caught on" could be finished by students' group discussion, which is a better way to teach and learn.

(3) Cultivation of students' learning strategies. When explaining example sentences, the teacher should pay attention to the connection of the new and previous language points, to let students make progress through the repetition and review. Oxford (1990) divided the learning strategies into two categories, direct and indirect ways. These two classes are subdivided into a total of six groups: memory, cognitive and compensation under the direct class; meta-cognitive, affective, and social under the indirect class. The researcher thinks that strategies should be used in each step of the classroom teaching, such as review, preview, note-taking, guessing, induction and deduction etc. Besides, how to make plan, how to self-evaluate, how to reduce the anxiety, how to cooperate should all be considered when the English teachers teach students.

To sum up, in order to design good example sentences in EFL class, English teachers should first improve their own language proficiency. Besides, teachers should observe students' behavior in the class to better satisfy students' need. In addition, we should be aware that teachers' in-class example-giving behavior is only one of the important teachers' in-class behaviors. In order to improve the teaching quality, EFL teachers still have a long way to go.

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